

# Robert Browning

1914–1997

Born in Scotland, Robert Browning studied at the University of Glasgow and then, from 1935 until 1939, at Balliol College, Oxford. With the outbreak of World War II, his scholarly endeavors took a somewhat different turn: the Allies needed linguists, and Robert Browning had extraordinary, indeed prodigious, skills. Some of the many languages he knew were acquired during the war. After the end of hostilities, he returned to academic life, teaching at the University of London, first at University College and then, from 1965 onwards, at Birkbeck College, where he was professor of classics and ancient history until his retirement in 1981.

Browning's linguistic expertise was remarkably extensive. In the polyglot society of Dumbarton Oaks, he was able to address everyone in his or her mother tongue, and with languages to spare. His main scholarly interest, of course, was in the Greek language, of which he had profound knowledge in its ancient, medieval, and modern forms. Palaeographer, philologist, student of literature, he taught us all—those who were formally his students and many who were not. His *Medieval and Modern Greek* (1969) is an invaluable study of the evolution of Greek, which he considered to be “one language, and not a series of distinct languages.” His pithy statements on difficult topics such as “diglossia” and his approach to the richness and complexity of the language resulted in a tour de force in compact form (134 pages); it was translated into Modern Greek in 1992.

He brought to the attention of the scholarly world little-known Byzantine men of letters and new texts that he published and commented upon. His exceptional knowledge of texts and authors was matched by a sympathetic analysis of the society that produced them, an analysis that eschewed the paradoxical or outré pronouncement in favor of statements that were thoughtful, judicious, wise, yet sometimes passionate. His “Literacy in the Byzantine World,”<sup>1</sup> with its insistence on defining different levels of literacy and thinking of them as a spectrum, is an example of this approach to the past, while his “Enlightenment and Repression in Byzantium in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries”<sup>2</sup> is representative of Browning's engaged scholarship—a sober discussion of intellectual and institutional developments, with an underlying profound condemnation of the restriction of intellectual freedom, what he called a “cultural failure of nerve.” His combined interests in literature and society led him to investigate modes of education in the

<sup>1</sup>BMGS 4 (1978), 39–54.

<sup>2</sup>Past and Present 69 (1975), 3–22.



Byzantine world, resulting in important studies on the “Anonymous Teacher” and the patriarchal school in the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Browning the historian was very much like Robert Browning the man: interested, compassionate, understanding, conscious of both the detail and the context. Places, like people, were real to him, as his studies of Thessaloniki and Athens easily attest. Byzantine civilization was alive to him, and lively, always interesting. He investigated its many facets both in works that dealt with Byzantium proper and in comparative works, such as *Byzantium and Bulgaria* (1975), where the economics, politics, and culture of these two different societies are brought into sharper focus through comparison, and close proximity is seen to have had some unexpected or counterintuitive results.

Until the end, Robert Browning retained a youthful, inquisitive mind, as well as an interest in young scholars and young programs, that is to say, the future of our discipline. He was deeply involved with the University of Cyprus, for example. As for the many scholars throughout the world whose lives he had touched, perhaps the best witness of their appreciation is the publication of two volumes in his honor, one in Australia in 1984 (*Maistor*) and another in Venice in 1996 (ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ), with titles that capture two different but important aspects of his scholarship. He was also committed to introducing Byzantium to the broader public, as demonstrated by *Justinian and Theodora* (1971, rev. ed. 1987) and *The Byzantine Empire* (1980, rev. ed. 1992).

Nowhere was he more loved and welcomed than at Dumbarton Oaks. His long association with the institution began with his appointment as a visiting scholar in the fall term of 1973–74, during which time he completed the manuscript of *Byzantium and Bulgaria* and wrote about half of *The Emperor Julian* (1975). In 1982, subsequent to his retirement from Birkbeck College, he began to make annual or semi-annual extended visits to Dumbarton Oaks, holding an appointment as a long-term fellow. These periods of residence in Washington proved productive for his own research program, enabling him to revise *Medieval and Modern Greek* for its second edition (1983) and to work on his contribution to the multivolume *History of Cyprus* (in preparation). He also devoted much time to the Dated Cypriot Manuscripts project, a joint endeavor of Dumbarton Oaks and the Cyprus Research Centre, serving as co-director of the project with Costas Constantinides. These efforts bore fruit in 1993 with the appearance of *Dated Greek Manuscripts from Cyprus to the Year 1570*, jointly published by the two research institutes.

From 1984 to 1990 Browning was an invaluable colleague in the preparation of the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991) at Dumbarton Oaks. An enthusiastic supporter of the project from its inception, he authored or co-authored ninety-four short entries and longer articles. The range of topics upon which he wrote, in such varied fields as Byzantine education, medieval Greek language, literature, and palaeography, Serbian and Bulgarian history and literature, and Balkan geography, reflect his linguistic versatility and broad expertise. In addition to writing entries, he was always helpful in advising on bibliography and the transliteration of Slavic names. The editorial staff used to remark, only partly in jest, that Professor Browning should have a permanent seat in the reference

<sup>3</sup>“The Correspondence of a Tenth-Century Byzantine Scholar,” *Byzantion* 24 (1954), 397–452; “The Patriarchal School at Constantinople in the Twelfth Century,” *Byzantion* 32 (1962), 167–202, and *ibid.*, 33 (1963), 11–40, reprinted in R. Browning, *Studies on Byzantine History, Literature and Education* (London, 1977), arts. ix and x.

room of the library so that he could be consulted in place of the customary dictionaries and encyclopedias!

In addition to carrying out his personal research, Robert Browning contributed to the scholarly community at Dumbarton Oaks and beyond through his teaching and lecturing. Over the years he gave many seminars, primarily on palaeography, but also on Byzantine education, that were eagerly attended by staff and fellows of the Byzantine Studies program, as well as by students from local universities. In the mid-1980s he was a stalwart participant in the Visiting Byzantinist program, co-sponsored by Dumbarton Oaks and the Medieval Academy of America, spending a week at each of six American colleges and universities as part of an effort to promote the broader dissemination of Byzantine studies in institutions of higher learning.

He was unfailingly generous toward his colleagues, always willing to advise on the translation of a difficult passage in Greek, suggesting textual emendations, helping foreign scholars improve a written English text, reading and commenting on colleagues' books and articles in draft form, and writing countless letters of recommendation on the ancient typewriter that he preferred to newfangled word processors. Even when he was back in London, Dumbarton Oaks was never far from his mind, for he would frequently recommend acquisitions for the Byzantine Library, sending information on books newly published in Great Britain.

Browning's regular visits to Dumbarton Oaks continued into his eighties, and he was planning yet another trip to America at the very time of his final illness. His scholarly expertise, advice, and friendship will be long remembered at this institution.

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